Rheumatoid arthritis patients have not experienced a decline in mortality, despite a dramatically increased life expectancy in the general population since the 1950s, according to investigators reporting on a cohort study.

In an interview, study investigator Dr. Hilal Maradit Kremers, of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., said, “One assumes that since rheumatologists are trying to get more aggressive, it must have a positive impact on mortality. But all of our research is showing that the mortality in the RA patients didn’t change.”

In a population-based incidence cohort study, researchers looked at all 822 adult residents of Rochester in whom RA was first diagnosed between 1955 and 1995 and all adult residents of Olmsted County in whom RA was diagnosed between 1995 and 2000. The patients were followed up through medical records and questionnaires. The mean age at incidence was 58 years. Nearly three-quarters were women. The median length of follow-up was 11.7 years (Arthritis Rheum. 2007;56:5353-7).

RA patients’ mortality was unchanged in each of the five study periods: from 1955 to 1964, 1965 to 1974, 1975 to 1984, 1985 to 1993, and 1994 to 2000. Female mortality hovered around 2.4 per 100 person-years, and male mortality was constant at about 2.5 per 100 person-years. In contrast, mortality in women in the Minnesota general population declined from 1.0 per 100 person-years in 1965 to 0.2 per 100 person-years in 2000. For men, the rate went from 1.2 to 0.3 per 100 person-years.

“Patients in whom RA was diagnosed in more recent years had a mortality rate similar to that of their peers in whom RA was diagnosed in the 1950s and 1960s,” said the study’s authors. “The dramatic changes in therapeutic strategies for RA in the last 4-5 decades have not had a major impact on the mortality rate.”

Study: Nonwhite Patients Wait Longer for DMARD Therapy

African American and Hispanic rheumatoid arthritis patients treated at public clinics wait longer to start disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs than do their white counterparts receiving care at private clinics.

Early intervention with DMARDs has been shown to delay joint damage. Dr. Maria E. Suarez-Almazor, rheumatology section chief at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, reported data from her retrospective cohort study of all medical records of new patients with a rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis seen at a public clinic (n=118) and a private clinic (n=167). The median time to initiation of DMARDs was 7 years for public clinic patients and 3 years for private clinic patients.

The median time to initiation of steroids was 23 years for public patients and 1 year for private patients. And in all patients at both clinics, the median time to initiation of DMARDs for white patients was 3 years, versus 7 years for nonwhites (J. Rheumatol. 2007 Nov 1 [Epub ahead of print]).

In an interview, Dr. Suarez-Almazor questioned whether the disparity is related to a communication problem between patients and doctors, such that physicians are unable to communicate the importance of expensive DMARDs.

She reported no conflicts of interest in relation to this study.

Image of the Month

The boy had back pain for more than a year. Neither physical therapy nor anti-inflammatory drugs helped. He had no significant history of injury and no family history of lower back pain.

He had no skin rashes, colitis, or other complaints. He previously had an MRI of his lumbar spine, which appeared normal, and a normal CT scan of his pelvis.

When he presented to a neurosurgeon, he had lower back pain and significant limitation of movement in his lumbar spine. An MRI of the sacroiliac revealed significant inflammation on both sides of the joint (see images), compatible with sacroilitis, a finding highly suggestive of ankylosing spondylitis (AS).

He was referred to Dr. Norman B. Gaylis, a rheumatologist in Miami.

Patients with AS tend to present with sacroilitis, especially when they have human leukocyte antigen B27-positive. “Many patients with back pain have their diagnosis missed,” he said, because either physicians don’t think of AS or the x-ray is negative. If an MRI is done, it is typically on the lumbar spine.

The differential diagnosis for lower back pain includes disk damage, trauma, or muscle strain, but sometimes patients are dismissed as imagining the pain.

Historically, diagnosis of AS has depended on the radiographic finding of sacroilitis. “The findings on MRI [for AS], similar to those for rheumatoid arthritis, occur far earlier than you will see on x-ray,” said Dr. Gaylis. MRI findings of AS—sacroilitis and intense enhancing bone marrow edema/osteitis, as in this case—can precede x-ray evidence by 3 years (J. Rheumatol. 1999;26:1533-8).

—Kerri Wachter

Mortality in RA Same Today as In 1950s, Despite New Therapies

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